

Soul Mountain



Gao Xingjian,
translated by Mabel Lee

Mabel Lee
Soul Mountain

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Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature 2000. Part travel diary, part philosophy, part love story, 'Soul Mountain' is an elegant, unforgettable novel that journeys deep into the heart of modern-day China. In 1982 Chinese playwright, novelist and artist Gao Xingjian was diagnosed with lung cancer, the very disease that had killed his father. For six weeks Gao inhabited a transcendental state of imminent death, treating himself to the finest foods he could afford while spending time reading in an old graveyard in the Beijing suburbs. But a secondary examination revealed there was no cancer – he had won a 'reprieve from death' and had been thrown back into the world of the living. Faced with a repressive cultural environment and the threat of a spell in a prison farm, Gao fled Beijing. He travelled first to the ancient forests of central China and from there to the east coast, passing through eight provinces and seven nature reserves, a journey of fifteen thousand kilometres over a period of five months. The result of this epic voyage of discovery is 'Soul Mountain'. Interwoven into this picaresque journey are myriad stories and countless memorable characters – from venerable Daoist masters and Buddhist monks and nuns to mythical Wild Men; deadly Qichun snakes to farting buses. Conventions are challenged, preconceptions are thwarted and the human condition, with all its foibles and triumphs, is laid bare.

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SOUL
MOUNTAIN
GAO XINGJIAN
Translated from the Chinese by Mabel Lee





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Praise

From the international reviews for *Soul Mountain*:

‘Arguably [Gao’s] finest work... *Soul Mountain* is a quirky, thick, playful monster of a book, a bit like what one might expect if Beckett or Ionesco had traveled in China and been steeped in Chinese myths. It is not easy to say what the novel is about — and yet the marvel is that somehow it is still both engaging and elegant.’

New York Times

‘A rich soup of a book... One man’s personal and philosophical odyssey evolves against the dramatic and vibrantly physical background of Central China’s ancient forests. Part novel, part philosophical tract, the genius of *Soul Mountain* lies in its not attempting to offer any answers... It instead belongs to that curious genre of intellectual quest dominated by the great German writer WG Sebald. This search for self serves to set the book beyond cultures while also succeeding in presenting the Western reader with a wonderfully broad portrait of a country caught between the ancient and the modern in a most fundamental way.’

Irish Times

‘Gao’s flight to rural China to evade imprisonment inspired this dazzling autobiographical novel... Superficially, this epic picaresque resembles familiar western literary forms but its bedrock is utterly other.’

Guardian

‘An original voice unlike any contemporary writing available in English... *Soul Mountain* is an extraordinary product of an imagination infused with European and Chinese cultures; an exploration of individual identity in a society that exalts the collective; and a daring play with voice that plunders ancient Chinese myths, philosophy, history, folk songs and memory’

The Australian

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Introduction

Gao Xingjian was born on 4 January 1940 in war-torn China soon after the beginning of the Japanese invasion. He completed secondary and tertiary studies in the People's Republic of China (established in 1949 after the Communist victory in the civil war against the Nationalists), graduating with a major in French from the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute in 1962. Gao Xingjian came to national and international prominence as a writer and critic during the early 1980s for his experimental works of drama, fiction and theory that contravened the guidelines established by the ideologues of the Chinese Communist Party. At the time, China was just beginning to emerge from the throes of the Cultural Revolution (1966—1976), a decade during which the self of the individual was virtually annihilated from intellectual and creative activities. Basic human instincts, sensitivities, thinking, perceptions and judgements were repressed and stunted, and extreme forms of socialist-realist and romantic-revolutionary representations of reality became the compulsory basis of all creative endeavours: literature and the arts therefore became representations of a distorted reality.

The end of the Cultural Revolution and the implementation of considerably more liberal policies meant that Gao Xingjian was able to publish, despite continuing aftershocks from those times. It also meant that he was able to travel abroad as a member of two writers' delegations — in 1979 to France, and in 1980 to Italy. From 1980 to 1987, he published short stories, novellas, critical essays and plays in various literary journals, as well as four books: *A Preliminary Discussion of the Art of Modern Fiction* (1981), a novella *A Pigeon Called Red Beak* (1985), *Collected Plays of Gao Xingjian* (1985), and *In Search of a Modern Form of Dramatic Representation* (1987). In addition, three of his plays were staged at the Beijing People's Art Theatre: *Absolute Signal* (1982), *Bus Stop* (1983) and *Wild Man* (1985). However, events in Gao Xingjian's life during those few years made him resolve to fully commit himself to the creative expression of his own reality, and no authority other than that of his self would again be allowed to dictate his judgements of that reality.

In 1987, when Gao Xingjian left China to take up a D.A.A.D fellowship in Germany, he did not intend to return. He had taken with him the most important thing in his life: the manuscript of a novel he had begun in Beijing in the summer of 1982. This novel was *Lingshan* which he subsequently completed in September 1989 in Paris (where he now resides and has French citizenship) and published in Taipei in 1990. Goran Malmqvist, whose translations of ten of Gao Xingjian's plays were published as a set by the Swedish Royal Dramatic Theatre in 1994, published the Swedish version of the novel as *Andarnas berg*, in 1992; and Noël and Liliane Dutrait's French version, *La Montagne de l'âme*, was published in 1995. For the English version, the title *Soul Mountain* has been used.

Soul Mountain is a literary response to the devastation of the self of the individual by the primitive human urge for the warmth and security of an other, or others, in other words by socialized life. The existence of an other resolves the problem of loneliness but brings with it anxieties for the individual, for inherent in any relationship is, inevitably, some form of power struggle. This is the existential dilemma confronting the individual, in relationships with parents, partners, family, friends and larger collective groups. Human history abounds with cases of the individual being induced by force or ideological persuasion to submit to the power of the collective; the surrender of the self to the collective eventually becomes habit, norm convention and tradition, and this phenomenon is not unique to any one culture.

In traditional China, the philosophy of Confucius was developed into an autocratic ideology alongside infrastructures that allowed it to permeate all levels of society, and the individual after birth was conditioned to be subservient to a clearly defined hierarchy of authorities. Unless intent on challenging those authorities and facing the consequences, nonconformists had the possibility of living the life of the recluse or taking temporary or long-term refuge in Buddhist monasteries or Daoist retreats, although as institutionalized orders, they too constitute collectives. Alternatively, the

nonconformist could remain in conventional society and survive by feigning madness or could achieve freedom, transcendence and self-realization in literary and artistic creation. However, these options were gradually eroded in China from the early years of the twentieth century as self-sacrifice was promoted first in the name of patriotism and then also in the name of the communist revolution which promised equality and social justice. Self-sacrifice became an entrenched habit that facilitated, aided and abetted the extremes of social conformity demanded by the Cultural Revolution which was engineered by sophisticated modern strategies for ideological control. Writers and artists for whom creation was the expression of the self were relentlessly and effectively silenced.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Gao Xingjian's irrepressible urge for artistic self-expression resulted in several hundred works of prose, plays and poems. He was aware that what he wrote could not be published, and that even as unpublished works they could be used as evidence against him for failing to comply with prescribed guidelines. To hide his writings became increasingly difficult, and he finally burnt all of them during the height of the Cultural Revolution rather than face the consequences of having them found.

As noted above, Gao Xingjian was able to publish a substantial number of works during the 1980s, but not without considerable anxiety. The publication of *A Preliminary Discussion of the Art of Modern Fiction* in 1981 resulted in his being criticized for promoting modernist ideas borrowed from the decadent capitalist West and he was placed under surveillance. Nonetheless, his debut as a playwright occurred in 1982 and took Beijing by storm: *Absolute Signal* was staged over a hundred times to packed performances at the Beijing People's Arts Theatre. However, those were politically ambiguous times and in the following year, 1983, a ban was placed on the performance of *Bus Stop*, although one special performance was ordered so that criticisms could be written up. As the author, Gao Xingjian was singled out for criticism during the "oppose spiritual pollution" campaign of that year, and he was banned from publishing: a senior Party member had declared *Bus Stop* "the most pernicious work since the establishment of the People's Republic". It was at this time, during a routine health check, that he was diagnosed with lung cancer, the disease that had killed his father a couple of years earlier. He resigned himself to imminent death until a later X-ray revealed that a wrong diagnosis had been made. He returned from the transcendent tranquillity he had experienced at the brink of death to the reality of life and the rumour that he was to be sent to the notorious prison farms of Qinghai province. He made a quick decision to flee Beijing immediately, and taking an advance royalty on his proposed novel, he absconded to the remote forest regions of Sichuan province and then wandered along the Yangtze River from its source down to the coast. By the time the "oppose spiritual pollution" campaign had subsided and it was safe for his return to Beijing, he had travelled for ten months over 15,000 kilometres of China.

These events of 1983 form the autobiographical substance of *Soul Mountain*, the story of one man's quest for inner peace and freedom. Gao Xingjian's brush with death had dislodged many forgotten fragments of his past and he recaptures these as well as his emotional experience of confronting death in *Soul Mountain*. Keeping his whereabouts secret, his travels take him to the Qiang, Miao and the Yi districts located on the fringes of Han Chinese civilization and he considers their traditions and practices with the curiosity of an archaeologist, historian and writer. His excursions into several nature reserves allow him to ponder the individual's place in nature; and his visits to Buddhist and Daoist institutions confirm that these are not places for him. Although he admires the forest ranger living the life of a virtual recluse and the solitary Buddhist monk-cum-itinerant doctor, he realizes that he still craves the warmth of human society, despite its anxieties. For the author, who has an obsessive need for self-expression, *Soul Mountain* poses the question: when deprived of human communication, will not the individual be condemned to the existence of the Wild Man in the forests of Shennongjia, the Big Foot of America or the Yeti of the Himalayas?

The autobiographical dimensions of *Soul Mountain* are richly overlaid with an exploration of various forms of human relationships and their implications for the individual. A rigorous and critical

analysis of the self of one man is achieved by dissecting the authorial self into the singular pronouns, “I”, “you”, “she” and “he”, who together constitute the composite protagonist. On his solitary journey, the protagonist seeks to alleviate his acute loneliness and creates “you” so that he will have someone to talk to. The “you”, who is a reflection of “I”, naturally experiences the same loneliness and creates “she” for companionship. The creation of an unnamed “she” allows the author to project himself with immense freedom into the psyche of women. The lengthy journey draws the “you” and the “I” too closely together and reduces the analytical distance sought by the author, so he allows “you” to walk away, and the back of “you” walking away becomes “he” ... and there are yet further changes.

The author, on his long journey as a political refugee from Beijing, employs the strategy of storytelling to disperse his loneliness, and at the same time reconstructs his personal past as well the impact of the Cultural Revolution on both the human and physical ecology of China. Through the characters who are projections of his self, the author engages in intimate conversations with anonymous others to tell the stories of many different types of people who populate China, but yet who in the final analysis can be found in all societies and cultures.

Gao Xingjian is a writer with an artists sensitivity and an intense and continuing curiosity for experimentation with language and other expressive forms; and he is acutely aware of the challenge to the writer, and to literary genres, in the visual-image-oriented world of modern times. Through the publication of the novel *Lingshan* in 1990, he has exorcised lingering remnants of homesickness and has succeeded in devoting himself singlemindedly to a creative life. Since 1987, full productions of his plays have been staged in Paris, Bordeaux, Avignon, Stockholm, Hamburg, New York, Taipei, Hong Kong, Vienna, Veroli, Poznan, Cluj, and have been performed in small theatres and workshops in Tokyo, Kobe, Edinburgh, Sydney, and Benin. However, since 1987, his only publication in China has been *Taowang* (Absconding), a play about three people who escape to a disused warehouse after the tanks roll into Tiananmen in the early hours of 4 June 1989. *Absconding* was reproduced in newspapers and magazines and criticized as a pornographic and immoral work fabricated by the writer Gao Xingjian who was not in Beijing at the time. On the other hand, the American group that had commissioned the play requested changes, insisting that the student demonstrators be portrayed as heroic figures. He declined to make any changes and withdrew the play. Living in Paris, Gao Xingjian mainly supports himself through painting the large black and white Chinese ink-paintings for which he is well known. To date he has held thirty solo exhibitions in various galleries throughout Europe, as well as Beijing (prior to 1987), New York, Taipei and Hong Kong; and his works have been collected in several galleries in Europe and America.

Most of Gao Xingjian’s recent writings have been published in Chinese in Taipei and Hong Kong. A significant number of these have also been published in French, and are now beginning to appear in English. Some of his recent plays were first written in French and then Chinese. In 1992 Gao Xingjian was honoured by the French with the title of Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. His play in French *Le Somnambule* won the Prix Communauté français de Belgique in 1994, and his novel *La Montagne de l’âme* was awarded the Prix du Nouvel An chinois by a French panel of judges in 1997. In early 2000, a second edition of *La Montagne de l’âme* went into print simultaneously with the French version of his second novel, *Yige ten de shengjǐng* which was published last year in Taipei. Noël and Liliane Dutraits French version is called *Le Livre de seul homme*, my English version will be called *One Man’s Bible*.

Mabel Lee

April 2000

Mabel Lee was born Mabel Hunt in Warialda, northern New South Wales, and attended Parramatta High School. A graduate of the University of Sydney (BA with First Class Honours and PhD), she was a member of the academic staff of her alma mater from 1966 until January 2000. She is co-editor of the University of Sydney East Asian Series which publishes the work of Australian

scholars on Asia, and the University of Sydney World Literature Series which sees literature as an activity that is shared by all peoples of the world. Mabel Lee retains a close association with the University of Sydney as Honorary Associate Professor in Chinese Studies.

1

The old bus is a city reject. After shaking in it for twelve hours on the potholed highway since early morning, you arrive in this mountain county town in the South.

In the bus station, which is littered with ice-block wrappers and sugar cane scraps, you stand with your backpack and a bag and look around for a while. People are getting off the bus or walking past, men humping sacks and women carrying babies. A crowd of youths, unhampered by sacks or baskets, have their hands free. They take sunflower seeds out of their pockets, toss them one at a time into their mouths and spit out the shells. With a loud crack the kernels are expertly eaten. To be leisurely and carefree is endemic to the place. They are locals and life has made them like this, they have been here for many generations and you wouldn't need to go looking anywhere else for them. The earliest to leave the place travelled by river in black canopy boats and overland in hired carts, or by foot if they didn't have the money. Of course at that time there were no buses and no bus stations. Nowadays, as long as they are still able to travel, they flock back home, even from the other side of the Pacific, arriving in cars or big air-conditioned coaches. The rich, the famous and the nothing in particular all hurry back because they are getting old. After all, who doesn't love the home of their ancestors? They don't intend to stay so they walk around looking relaxed, talking and laughing loudly, and effusing fondness and affection for the place. When friends meet they don't just give a nod or a handshake in the meaningless ritual of city people, but rather they shout the person's name or thump him on the back. Hugging is also common, but not for women. By the cement trough where the buses are washed, two young women hold hands as they chat. The women here have lovely voices and you can't help taking a second look. The one with her back to you is wearing an indigo-print headscarf. This type of scarf, and how it's tied, dates back many generations but is seldom seen these days. You find yourself walking towards them. The scarf is knotted under her chin and the two ends point up. She has a beautiful face. Her features are delicate, so is her slim body. You pass close by them. They have been holding hands all this time, both have red coarse hands and strong fingers. Both are probably recent brides back seeing relatives and friends, or visiting parents. Here, the word *xifu* means one's own daughter-in-law and using it like rustic Northerners to refer to any young married woman will immediately incur angry abuse. On the other hand, a married woman calls her own husband *laogong*, yet your *laogong* and my *laogong* are both used. People here speak with a unique intonation even though they are descendants of the same legendary emperor and are of the same culture and race.

You can't explain why you're here. It happened that you were on a train and this person mentioned a place called Lingshan. He was sitting opposite and your cup was next to his. As the train moved, the lids on the cups clattered against one another. If the lids kept on clattering or clattered and then stopped, that would have been the end of it. However, whenever you and he were about to separate the cups, the clattering would stop, and as soon as you and he looked away the clattering would start again. He and you reached out, but again the clattering stopped. The two of you laughed at the same instant, put the cups well apart, and started a conversation. You asked him where he was going.

“Lingshan.”

“What?”

“Lingshan, *ling* meaning spirit or soul, and *shan* meaning mountain.”

You'd been to lots of places, visited lots of famous mountains, but had never heard of this place.

Your friend opposite had closed his eyes and was dozing. Like anyone else, you couldn't help being curious and naturally wanted to know which famous places you'd missed on your travels. Also, you liked doing things properly and it was annoying that there was a place you've never even heard of. You asked him about the location of Lingshan.

“At the source of the You River,” he said, opening his eyes.

You didn’t know this You River either, but was embarrassed about asking and gave an ambiguous nod which could have meant either “I see, thanks” or “Oh, I know the place”. This satisfied your desire for superiority, but not your curiosity. After a while you asked how to get there and the route up the mountain.

“Take the train to Wuyizhen, then go upstream by boat on the You River.”

“What’s there? Scenery? Temples? Historic sites?” you asked, trying to be casual.

“It’s all virgin wilderness.”

“Ancient forests?”

“Of course, but not just ancient forests.”

“What about Wild Men?” you said, joking.

He laughed without any sarcasm, and didn’t seem to be making fun of himself which intrigued you even more. You had to find out more about him.

“Are you an ecologist? A biologist? An anthropologist? An archaeologist?”

He shook his head each time then said, “I’m more interested in living people.”

“So you’re doing research on folk customs? You’re a sociologist? An ethnographer? An ethnologist? A journalist, perhaps? An adventurer?”

“I’m an amateur in all of these.”

The two of you started laughing.

“I’m an expert amateur in all of these!”

The laughing made you and him cheerful. He lit a cigarette and couldn’t stop talking as he told you about the wonders of Lingshan.

Afterwards, at your request, he tore up his empty cigarette box and drew a map of the route up Lingshan.

In the North it is already late autumn but the summer heat hasn’t completely subsided. Before sunset, it is still quite hot in the sun and sweat starts running down your back. You leave the station to have a look around. There’s nothing nearby except for the little inn across the road. It’s an old-style two-storey building with a wooden shopfront. Upstairs the floorboards creak badly but worse still is the grime on the pillow and sleeping mat. If you wanted to have a wash, you’d have to wait till it was dark to strip off” and pour water over yourself in the damp and narrow courtyard. This is a stopover for the village peddlers and craftsmen.

It’s well before dark, so there’s plenty of time to find somewhere clean. You walk down the road looking around the little town, hoping to find some indication, a billboard or a poster, or just the name “Lingshan” to tell you you’re on the right track and haven’t been tricked into making this long excursion. You look everywhere but don’t find anything. There were no tourists like you amongst the other passengers who got off the bus. Of course you’re not *that* sort of tourist, it’s just what you’re wearing: strong sensible sports shoes and a backpack with shoulder straps, no-one else is dressed like you. But this isn’t one of the tourist spots frequented by newlyweds and retirees. Those places have been transformed by tourism, coaches are parked everywhere and tourist maps are on sale. Tourist hats, tourist T-shirts, tourist singlets and tourist handkerchiefs printed with the name of the place are in all the little shops and stalls, and the name of the place is used in the trade names of all the “foreign exchange currency only” hotels for foreigners, the “locals with references only” hostels and sanatoriums, and of course the small private hotels competing for customers. You haven’t come to enjoy yourself in one of those places on the sunny side of a mountain where people congregate just to look at and jostle one another and to add to the litter of melon rind, fruit peel, soft drink bottles, cans, cartons, sandwich wrappings and cigarette butts. Sooner or later this place will also boom but you’re here before they put up the gaudy pavilions and terraces, before the reporters come with their cameras and before the celebrities come to put up plaques with their calligraphy. You can’t help feeling rather pleased with yourself, and yet you’re anxious. There’s no sign of anything here for

tourists, have you made a blunder? You're only going by the map on the cigarette box in your shirt pocket, what if the expert amateur you met on the train had only heard about the place on his travels? How do you know he wasn't just making it all up? You've never seen the place mentioned in travel accounts and it's not listed in the most up-to-date travel guides. Of course, it isn't hard to find places like Lingtai, Lingqiu, Lingyan and even Lingshan on provincial maps and you know very well that in the histories and classics, Lingshan appears in works dating back to the ancient shamanistic work *Classic of the Mountains and Seas* and the old geographical gazetteer *Annotated Water Classic*. It was also at Lingshan that Buddha enlightened the Venerable Mahakashyapa. You're not stupid, so just use your brains, first find this place Wuyizhen on the cigarette box, for this is how you'll get to Lingshan.

You return to the bus station and go into the waiting room. The busiest place in this small town is now deserted. The ticket window and the parcel window are boarded up from the inside so knocking is useless. There's no-one to ask so you can only go through the lists of stops above the ticket window: Zhang Village, Sandy Flat, Cement Factory, Old Hut, Golden Horse, Good Harvest, Hood Waters, Dragon Bay, Peach Blossom Hollow ... the names keep getting better, but the place you want isn't there. This is just a small town but there are several routes and quite a few buses go through. The busiest route, with five or six buses a day, is to Cement Factory but that's definitely not a tourist route. The route with the fewest buses, one a day, is sure to go to the furthest destination and it turns out that Wuyizhen is the last stop. There's nothing special about the name, it's just like any other place name and there's nothing magical about it. Still, you seem to have found one end of a hopeless tangle and while you're not ecstatic, you're certainly relieved. You'll need to buy a ticket in the morning an hour before departure and you know from experience that with mountain buses like this, which run once a day, just to get on will be a fight. Unless you're prepared to do battle, you'll just have to queue up early.

But, right now, you've lots of time, although your backpack's a nuisance. As you amble along the road timber trucks go by noisily sounding their horns. In the town the noise worsens as trucks, some with trailers, blast their horns and conductors hang out of windows loudly banging the sides of the buses to hasten the pedestrians off the road.

The old buildings on both sides stand flush with the road and all have wooden shopfronts. The downstairs is for business and upstairs there is washing hung out to dry — nappies, bras, underpants with patched crotches, floral-print bedspreads — like flags of all the nations, flapping in the noise and dust of the traffic. The concrete telegraph poles along the street are pasted at eye level with all sorts of posters. One for curing body odour catches your attention. This is not because you've got body odour but because of the fancy language and the words in brackets after "body odour".

Body odour (known also as scent of the immortals) is a disgusting condition with an awful, nauseating smell. It often affects social relationships and can delay life's major event: marriage. It disadvantages young men and women at job interviews or when they try to enlist, therefore inflicting much suffering and anguish. By using a new total treatment, we can instantly eradicate the odour with a rate of up to 97.53% success. For joy in life and future happiness, we welcome you to come and rid yourself of it...

After that you come to a stone bridge: no body odour here, just a cool, refreshing breeze. The bridge spanning the broad river has a bitumen surface but the carved monkeys on the worn stone posts testify to its long history. You lean on the concrete railing and survey the township alongside the bridge. On both banks, black rooftops overlapping like fish-scales stretch endlessly into the distance. The valley opens out between two mountains where the upper areas of gold paddy fields are inlaid with clusters of green bamboos. The river is blue and clear as it trickles over the sandy shores, but close to the granite pylons dividing the current it becomes inky green and deep. Just past the hump of the bridge the rashing water churns loudly and white foam surfaces from whirlpools. The ten-metre-high stone embankment is stained with water levels — the new greyish-yellow lines were probably left by the recent summer floods. Can this be the You River? And does it flow down from Lingshan?

The sun is about to set. The bright orange disc is infused with light but there's no glare. You gaze into the distance at the hazy layers of jagged peaks where the two sides of the valley join. This ominous black image nibbles at the lower edges of the glowing sun which seems to be revolving. The sun turns a dark red, gender, and projects brilliant gold reflections onto the entire bend of the river: the dark blue of the water fusing with the dazzling sunlight throbs and pulsates. As the red sphere seats itself in the valley it becomes serene, awesomely beautiful, and there are sounds. You hear them, elusive, distinctly reverberating from deep in your heart and radiating outwards until the sun seems to prop itself up on its toes, stumble, then sink into the black shadows of the mountains, scattering glowing colours throughout the sky. An evening wind blows noisily by your ears and cars drive past, as usual sounding their deafening horns. You cross the bridge and see there a new dedication stone with engraved characters painted in red: "Yongning Bridge. Built in the third year of the Kaiyuan reign period of the Song Dynasty and repaired in 1962. This stone was laid in 1983." It no doubt marks the beginning of the tourist industry here.

Two food stalls stand at the end of the bridge. In the one on the left you eat a bowl of bean curd, the smooth and tasty kind with all the right ingredients. Hawkers used to sell it in the streets and lanes but it completely disappeared for quite some years and has recently been revived as family enterprises. In the stall on the right you eat two delicious sesame-coated shallot pancakes, straight off the stove and piping-hot. Then at one of the stalls, you can't remember which, you eat a bowl of sweet *yuanxiao* dumplings broiled in rice wine. They are the size of large pearls. Of course, you're not as academic about food as Mr Ma the Second who toured West Lake, but you do have a hefty appetite nevertheless. You savour this food of your ancestors and listen to customers chatting with the proprietors. They're mostly locals and all know one another. You try using the mellifluous local accent to be friendly, you want to be one of them. You've lived in the city for a long time and need to feel that you have a hometown. You want a hometown so that you'll be able to return to your childhood to recollect long lost memories.

On this side of the bridge you eventually find an inn on an old cobblestone street. The wooden floors have been mopped and it's clean enough. You are given a small single room which has a plank bed covered with a bamboo mat. The cotton blanket is a suspicious grey — either it hasn't been washed properly or that's the original colour. You throw aside the greasy pillow from under the bamboo mat and luckily it's hot so you can do without the bedding. What you need right now is to off-load your luggage which has become quite heavy, wash off the dust and sweat, strip, and stretch yourself out on the bed.

There's shouting and yelling next door. They're gambling and you can hear them picking up and throwing down the cards. A timber partition separates you and, through the holes poked into the paper covering the cracks, you make out the blurred figures of some bare-chested men. You're not so tired that you can drop off to sleep just like that. You tap on the wall and instantly there's loud shouting next door. They're not shouting at you but amongst themselves — there are always winners and losers and it sounds as though the loser is trying to get out of paying. They're openly gambling in the inn despite the public security office notice on the wall prohibiting gambling and prostitution. You decide to see if the law works. You put on some clothes, go down the corridor and knock on the half-closed door. Your knocking makes no difference, they keep shouting and yelling inside and nobody takes any notice. So you push open the door and go in. The four men sitting around the bed in the middle of the room all turn to look at you. But it's you and not they who gets a rude shock. The men all have bits of paper stuck on their faces, on their foreheads, lips, noses and cheeks, and they look ugly and ridiculous. They aren't laughing and are glaring at you. You've butted in and they're clearly annoyed.

"Oh, you're playing cards," you say, putting on an apologetic look.

They go on playing. The long paper cards have red and black markings like mahjong and there's a Gate of Heaven and a Prison of Hell. The winner penalizes the loser by tearing off a strip of

newspaper and sticking it on a designated spot. Whether this is a prank, a way of letting off steam, or a tally, is something agreed upon by the gamblers and there is no way for outsiders to know what it's all about.

You beat a retreat, go back to your room, lie down again, and see a thick mass of black specks around the light globe. Millions of mosquitoes are waiting for the light to go out so that they can come down and feast on your blood. You quickly let down the net and are enclosed in a narrow conical space, at the top of which is a bamboo hoop. It's been a long time since you've slept under a hoop like this, and you've long since passed the age of being able to stare at the hoop to lose yourself in reverie. Today, you can't know what traumas tomorrow will bring. You've learnt through experience everything you need to know. What else are you looking for? When a man gets to middle age shouldn't he look for a peaceful and stable existence, find a not-too-demanding sort of a job, stay in a mediocre position, become a husband and a father, set up a comfortable home, put money in the bank and add to it every month so there'll be something for old age and a little left over for the next generation?

2

It is in the Qiang region halfway up Qionglai Mountain, in the border areas of the Qinghai-Tibetan highlands and the Sichuan basin, that I witness a vestige of early human civilization — the worship of fire. Fire, the bringer of civilization, has been worshipped by the early ancestors of human beings everywhere. It is sacred. The old man is sitting in front of the fire drinking liquor from a bowl. Before each sip he puts a finger into it and flicks some on the charcoals which splutter noisily and send out blue sparks. It is only then that I perceive that I too am real.

“That’s for the God of the Cooking Stove, it’s thanks to him that we can eat and drink,” he says.

The dancing light of the fire shines on his thin cheeks, the high bridge of his nose, and his cheekbones. He tells me he is of the Qiang nationality and that he’s from Gengda village down the mountain. I can’t ask straight out about demons and spirits, so I tell him I’m here to do some research on the folk songs of the mountain. Do traditional song masters and dancers still exist here? He says he’s one of them. The men and women all used to form a circle around the fire and dance right through to daybreak, but later on it was banned.

“Why?” I know quite well but I ask. I’m being dishonest again.

“It was the Cultural Revolution. They said the songs were dirty so we turned to singing *Sayings of Mao Zedong* songs instead.”

“And what about after that?” I persist in asking. This is becoming a habit.

“No-one sings those anymore. People are doing the dances again but not many of the young people can do them, I’m teaching the dances to some of them.”

I ask him for a demonstration. Without any hesitation, he instantly gets to his feet and proceeds to dance and sing. His voice is low and rich, he’s got a good voice. I’m sure he’s Qiang even if the police in charge of the population register insist that he isn’t. They think anyone claiming to be Tibetan or Qiang is trying to evade birth restrictions so they can have more children.

He sings song after song. He says he’s a fun-loving person, and I believe him. When he finished up as village head, he went back to being one of the mountain people, an old mountain man who likes good fun, though unfortunately he is past the age for romance.

He also knows incantations, the kind hunters employ when they go into the mountains. They are called mountain blackmagic or hexes and he has no qualms about using them. He really believes they can drive wild animals into pits or get them to step into snares. They aren’t used only on animals, they’re also used against other human beings for revenge. A victim of mountain blackmagic won’t be able to find his way out of the mountains. They are like the “demon walls” I heard about as a child: when a person has been travelling for some time at night in the mountains, a wall, a cliff or a deep river appears right in front of him, so that he can’t go any further. If the spell isn’t broken the person’s feet don’t move forward and even if he keeps walking, he stays exactly where he started off. Only at daybreak does he discover that he has been going around in circles. That’s not so bad, the worst is when a person is led into a blind alley — that means death.

He intones strings of incantations. It’s not slow and relaxed like when he is singing, but just *nan-nan-na-na* to a quick beat. I can’t understand it at all but I can feel the mystical pull of the words and a demonic, powerful atmosphere instantly permeates the room, the inside of which is black from smoke. The glow of the flames licking the iron pot of mutton stew makes his eyes glint. This is all starkly real.

While you search for the route to Lingshan, I wander along the Yangtze River looking for this sort of reality. I had just gone through a crisis and then, on top of that, a doctor wrongly diagnosed me with lung cancer. Death was playing a joke on me but now that I’ve escaped the demon wall, I am secretly rejoicing. Life for me once again has a wonderful freshness. I should have left those contaminated surroundings long ago and returned to nature to look for this authentic life.

In those contaminated surroundings I was taught that life was the source of literature, that literature had to be faithful to life, faithful to real life. My mistake was that I had alienated myself from life and ended up turning my back on real life. Life is not the same as manifestations of life. Real life, or in other words the basic substance of life, should be the former and not the latter. I had gone against real life because I was simply stringing together life's manifestations, so of course I wasn't able to accurately portray life and in the end only succeeded in distorting reality.

I don't know whether I'm now on the right track but in any case I've extricated myself from the bustling literary world and have also escaped from my smoke-filled room. The books piled everywhere in that room were oppressive and stifling. They expounded all sorts of truths, historical truths to truths on how to be human. I couldn't see the point of so many truths but still got enmeshed in the net of those truths and was struggling hopelessly, like an insect caught in a spider's web. Fortunately, the doctor who gave the wrong diagnosis saved my life. He was quite frank and got me to compare the two chest X-rays taken on two separate occasions — a blurry shadow on the left lobe of the lung had spread along the second rib to the wall of the windpipe. It wouldn't help even to have the whole of the left lobe removed. The outcome was obvious. My father had died of lung cancer. He died within three months of it being discovered and it was this doctor who had correctly diagnosed it. I had faith in his medical expertise and he had faith in science. The chest X-rays taken at two different hospitals were identical, there was no possibility of a technical mistake. He also wrote an authorization for a sectional X-ray, the appointment was in two weeks' time. This was nothing to get worried about, it was just to determine the extent of the tumour. My father had this done before he died. The outcome would be the same whether or not I had the X-ray, it was nothing special. That I in fact would slip through the fingers of Death can only be put down to good luck. I believe in science but I also believe in fate.

I once saw a four-inch length of wood which had been collected in the Qiang region by an anthropologist during the 1930s. It was a carved statue of a person doing a handstand. The head had ink markings for the eyes, nose and mouth, and the word "longevity" had been written on the body. It was called "Wuchang Upside Down" and there was something oddly mischievous about it. I ask the Qiang retired village head whether such talismans are still around. He tells me these are called "old root". This wooden idol has to accompany the newborn from birth to death. At death it accompanies the corpse from the house and after the burial it is placed in the wilderness to allow the spirit to return to nature. I ask him if he can get me one so that I can carry it on me. He laughs and says these are what hunters tuck into their shirts to ward off evil spirits, they wouldn't be of any use to someone like me.

"Is there an old hunter who knows about this sort of magic and can take me hunting with him?"

I ask.

"Grandpa Stone would be the best," he says after thinking about it.

"How can I find him?" I ask right away.

"He's in Grandpa Stone's Hut."

"Where's this Grandpa Stone's Hut?"

"Go another twenty *li* on to Silver Mine Gully then follow the creek right up to the end. There you'll find a stone hut."

"Is that the name of the place or do you mean the hut of Grandpa Stone?"

He says it's the name of the place, that there's in fact a stone hut, and that Grandpa Stone lives there.

"Can you take me to him?" I ask.

"He's dead. He lay down on his bed and died in his sleep. He was too old, he lived to well over ninety, some even say well over a hundred. In any case, nobody's sure about his age."

"Are any of his descendants still alive?"

"In my grandfather's generation and for as long as I can remember, he was always on his own."

"Without a wife?"

“He lived on his own in Silver Mine Gully. He lived high up the gully, in the solitary hut, alone. Oh, and that rifle of his is still hanging on the wall of the hut.”

I ask him what he’s trying to tell me.

He says Grandpa Stone was a great hunter, a hunter who was an expert in the magical arts. There are no hunters like that these days. Everyone knows that his rifle is hanging in the hut, that it never misses its target, but nobody dares to go and take it.

“Why?” I’m even more puzzled.

“The route into Silver Mine Gully is cut.”

“There’s no way through?”

“Not anymore. Earlier on people used to mine silver there, a firm from Chengdu hired a team of workers and they began mining. Later on, after the mine was looted, everyone just left, and the plank roads they had laid either broke up or rotted.”

“When did all this happen?”

“When my grandfather was still alive, more than fifty years ago.”

That would be about right, after all he’s already retired and has become history, real history.

“So since then nobody’s ever gone there?” I become even more intrigued.

“Hard to say, anyway it’s hard to get there.”

“And the hut has rotted?”

“Stone collapses, how can it rot?”

“I was talking about the ridgepole.”

“Oh, quite right.”

He doesn’t want to take me there, nor does he want to find a hunter for me, so that’s why he’s leading me on like this, I think.

“Then how do you know the rifle’s still hanging on the wall?” I ask, regardless.

“That’s what everyone says, someone must’ve seen it. They all say that Grandpa Stone is incredible, his corpse hasn’t rotted and wild animals don’t dare to go near. He just lies there all stiff and emaciated, and his rifle is hanging there on the wall.”

“Impossible,” I declare. “With the high humidity up here in the mountain, the corpse would have rotted and the rifle would have turned into a pile of rust.”

“I don’t know. Anyway, people have been saying this for years.” He refuses to give in and sticks to his story. The light of the fire dances in his eyes and I seem to detect a cunning streak in them.

“And you’ve never seen him?” I won’t let him off.

“People who have seen him say that he seems to be asleep, that he’s emaciated, and that the rifle is hanging there on the wall above his head,” he says, unruffled. “He knew blackmagic. It’s not just that people don’t dare go there to steal his rifle, even animals don’t dare to go near.”

The hunter is already myth. To talk about a mixture of history and legend is how folk stories are born. Reality exists only through experience, and it must be personal experience. However, once related, even personal experience becomes a narrative. Reality can’t be verified and doesn’t need to be, that can be left for the “reality-of-life” experts to debate. What is important is life. Reality is simply that I am sitting by the fire in this room which is black with grime and smoke and that I see the light of the fire dancing in his eyes. Reality is myself, reality is only the perception of this instant and it can’t be related to another person. All that needs to be said is that outside, a mist is enclosing the green-blue mountain in a haze and your heart is reverberating with the rushing water of a swift-flowing stream.

3

So you arrive in Wuyizhen, on a long and narrow street inlaid with black cobblestones, and walking along this cobblestone street with its deep single-wheel rut, you suddenly enter your childhood, you seem to have spent your childhood in an old mountain town like this. The one-wheel handcarts can no longer be seen and instead of the creak of jujube axles greased with bean oil, the streets are filled with the din of bicycle bells. Cyclists here need the skills of an acrobat. With heavy hessian bags slung across the saddle, they cause loud swearing as they weave through people with carrying poles or pulling wooden carts and the hawkers under the awnings. It is loud, colourful swearing which mingles with the general din of the hawkers' calls, bargaining, joking and laughing. You breathe in the smell of soya sauce pickles, boiled pork, raw hide, pine wood, dried rice stalks and lime as your eyes busily take in the narrow shopfronts lining the street with products of the South. There are soya bean shops, oil shops, rice shops, Chinese and Western medicine shops, silk and cotton shops, shoe shops, tea shops, butcher stalls, tailor shops, and shops selling stoves, rope, pottery, incense, candles and paper money. The shops, squashed up one against the other, are virtually unchanged from Qing Dynasty times. The smashed signboard of the Ever Prosperous Restaurant has been repaired and one of the flat-bottomed pans used for frying its speciality *guotie* dumplings is beaten like a gong to announce it is back in business. The wine banner is again hanging from the upstairs window of the First Class Delicacies Restaurant. The most imposing structure is the state-run department store, a newly renovated three-storey concrete building. A single display window is the size of one of the old shops but the insides of the glass windows look as if they have never been cleaned. The photographer's shop is eye-catching: photos of women in coquettish poses and wearing awful dresses are on display. They are all local beauties and not movie poster mm stars from some place at the other end of the earth. This place really produces good-looking women, every one of them is stunning. They have their beautiful cheeks cupped in their hands and their eyes have alluring looks. They've been carefully coached by the photographer but they are garishly dressed. Enlargements and colour prints are available and there's a sign saying photos can be collected in twenty days, apparently they have to be developed in the city. Had fate not otherwise decreed, you could have been born in this town, grown up, and married here. You would have married a beautiful woman like one of these, who would long since have borne you sons and daughters. At this point, you smile and quickly move off in case people imagine you've taken a fancy to one of the women and start getting the wrong idea. And yet it is you who are carried away by your imagination. As you look up at the balconies above the shops with their curtained windows and pots of miniature trees and flowers, you can't help wondering about the people who live here. There's a big apartment with an iron padlock on the door — the pillars are now crooked but the carved eaves and railings which have fallen into disrepair indicate how imposing the place was at one time. The fates of its owners and their descendants fill you with curiosity. The shop at the side sells Hong Kong style dresses and jeans, and the stockings on show have a Western woman showing off her legs on the packaging. At the front door there's a gold-plated sign, "Ever New Technical Development Company", but it's not clear what sort of technical development it is. Further on is a shop with heaps of unprocessed lime, and further on still is probably a miller's and next to that a vacant allotment where rice noodles are drying on wires strung between posts. You turn back and go into a small lane next to the hot water urn of the tea stall, then turning a corner you are again lost in memories.

Within a half-closed door is a damp courtyard, overgrown with weeds, desolate and lonely, with piles of rubble in the corners. You recall the back courtyard with the crumbling wall of your childhood home. You were afraid but it had a fascination for you, for the fox fairies of story books came from there. After school, without fail, you would go off alone with some trepidation to have a look. You never saw a fox fairy but that feeling of mystery always lingered in your childhood memories. There

is an old stone bench riddled with cracks and a well which is probably dry. The mid-autumn wind blows through the dry yellow weeds in the rubble and the sun is very bright. These homes with their courtyard doors shut tight all have their histories which are all like ancient stories. In winter, the north wind is howling through the lane, you are wearing new warm padded cloth shoes and are with other children stamping your feet by the wall. You can remember the words of the ditty:

In moonlight thick as soup
I ride out to burn incense
For Luo Dajie who burnt to death
For Dou Sanniang who died in a rage
Sanniang picked beans
But the pods were empty
She married Master Ji
But Master Ji was short
So she married a crab
The crab crossed a ditch
Trod on an eel
The eel complained
It complained to a monk
The monk said a prayer
A prayer to Guanyin
So Guanyin pissed
The piss hit my son
His belly hurt
So I got an exorcist to dance
The dance didn't work
But still cost heaps of money

Pale withered weeds and lush green new sprouts in the roof-tiles quiver in the wind. How long is it since you've seen grass growing in roof-tiles? Your bare feet patter on the black cobblestone street with its deep single-wheel rut, you've run out of your childhood back into the present. The bare feet, the dirty black feet, patter right there in front of your eyes. It doesn't matter if you've never run barefoot, what is crucial is this image in your mind.

After a while you find your way out of the little lanes and make it back on the highway. This is where the bus from the county town turns around to go back. There's a bus station by the road with a ticket window and some benches inside, this is where you got off the bus earlier on. Diagonally across the road is an inn — a row of single-storey rooms — and the whitewashed brick wall has a sign "Good Rooms Within". It looks clean and you have to find somewhere to stay, so you go in. An old attendant is sweeping the corridor and you ask her if there's a room. She says yes. You ask her how much further is it to Lingshan. She gives you a cold look, this is a state-run inn, she's on a monthly state award wage and isn't generous with words.

"Number two," she says pointing with the broom handle to a room with the door open. You take your luggage in and notice there are two beds. On one there's someone lying on his back, one leg crossed over the other, with a copy of *Unofficial Record of the Flying Fox* in his hands. The title is written on the brown paper cover of the book, apparently on loan from a bookstall. You greet him and he puts down the book to give a friendly nod.

"Hello."

"Staying here?"

"Yes."

"Have a cigarette." He tosses you a cigarette.

“Thanks.” You sit on the empty bed opposite. It happens that he wants to chat. “How long have you been here?”

“Ten or so days.” He sits up and lights himself a cigarette.

“Here buying stock?” you ask, taking a guess.

“I’m here for timber.”

“Is it easy getting timber here?”

“Have you got a quota?” he asks instead, starting to become interested.

“What quota?”

“A state-plan quota, of course.”

“No.”

“Then it’s not easy to get.” He lies down again.

“Is there a timber shortage even in this forest region?”

“There’s timber around but prices are different.” He can’t be bothered, he can tell you’re not in the game.

“Are you waiting for cheaper prices?”

“Yes,” he responds indifferently, taking up his book again to read.

“You stock buyers really get to know about a lot of things.” You have to flatter him so that you can ask him some questions.

“Not really.” He becomes modest.

“The place Lingshan, do you know how to get there?”

He doesn’t reply so you can only say you’ve come to do some sightseeing and is there anywhere worth seeing.

“There’s a pavilion by the river. If you sit there you’ll get a good view of the other side of the river.”

“Enjoy your rest!” you say for want of something to say.

You leave your bags, find the attendant to register and set off*. The wharf is at the end of the highway. The steps, made of long slabs of rock, go down steeply for more than ten metres and moored there are several black canopy boats with their bamboo poles up. The river isn’t wide but the riverbed is, clearly it’s not the rainy season. There is a boat on the opposite bank and people are getting on and getting off. The people on the stone steps are all waiting for it to come across.

Up from the wharf, on the embankment, there is a pavilion with upturned eaves and curling corners. The outside is lined with empty baskets and resting inside are farmers from the other side who were here for the market and have sold all of their goods. They are talking loudly and it sounds like the language used in the short stories of the Song Dynasty. The pavilion has been painted recently and under the eaves the dragon and phoenix design has been repainted and the two principal columns at the front are inscribed with the couplet:

Sitting at rest know not to discuss the shortcomings of other people

Setting out on a journey fully appreciate the beauty of the dragon river

You go around to look at the two columns at the back. These words are written there:

On departing do not forget to heed the duckweed waters

Turn back to gaze in wonder at Lingshan amongst the phoenixes

You’re intrigued. The boat is probably about to arrive as the people resting and cooling off have got up and are rushing to shoulder their carrying poles. Only an old man is left sitting in the pavilion.

“Venerable elder, may I ask if these couplets ...”

“Are you asking about the couplets on the principal columns?” the old man corrects me.

“Yes, venerable master, might I ask who wrote the couplets on the principal columns?” you say with added reverence.

“The scholar Mr Chen Xianning!” His mouth opens wide, revealing sparse black teeth, as he enunciates each of the words with great precision.

“I don’t know of him.” You’d best be frank about your ignorance. “At which university does this gentleman teach?”

“People like you wouldn’t know, of course. He lived more than a thousand years ago.” The old man is contemptuous.

“Please don’t make fun of me, venerable elder,” you say, trying to stop him ridiculing you.

“You don’t need glasses, can’t you see?” he says pointing up to the beam at the top of the columns.

You look up and see on the beam which hasn’t been repainted, these words written in vermilion:

Erected during the Great Song Dynasty in the first month of spring in the tenth year of the Shaoxing reign period and repaired during the Great Qing Dynasty on the twenty-ninth day of the third month of the nineteenth year of the Qianlong reign period.

4

I set out from the hostel of the nature reserve and go back to the house of the Qiang retired village head. A big padlock is hanging on his door. This is the third time I've been back but again he's not there. It seems that this door which can lead me into that mystical world has closed for me.

I wander on in fine drizzling rain. It's been a long time since I have wandered about in this sort of misty rain. I pass by the Sleeping Dragon Village Hospital, it looks deserted. The forest is quiet but there is always a stream somewhere not too far away, for I can hear the sound of trickling water. It's been ages since I have had such freedom, I don't have to think about anything and I let my thoughts ramble. There's no-one on the highway, and no vehicles are in sight. As far as the eye can see it is a luxuriant green. It is the middle of spring.

The big deserted compound on the side of the road is probably the headquarters of the bandit chief Song Guotai mentioned by the reserve warden last night. Forty years ago, a single mountain road for horse caravans was the only access to this place. To the north it crossed the 5000-metre-high Balang Mountains into the Qinghai-Tibetan highlands and to the south it went through the Min River valley into the Sichuan basin. The opium smugglers from the South and the salt smugglers from the North all obediently put down money here to buy passage through. This was called showing proper respect. If there was a fuss and proper respect wasn't shown, it would be a case of arriving and not returning. They would all be sent to meet the King of Hell.

It is an old timber compound. The two big heavy wooden gates are wide open and inside, surrounded on three sides by two-storey buildings, is an overgrown courtyard big enough for a caravan of thirty or forty horses. Probably in those days, as soon as the gates were closed, the eaved balconies with their wooden railings would be thick with armed bandits so that caravans thinking of stopping the night would be trapped like turtles in a jar. Even if a shoot-out took place there wouldn't have been anywhere in the courtyard to escape the bullets.

There are two sets of stairs in the courtyard. I go up. The floorboards creak noisily and I deliberately tread heavily to show my presence. However the upstairs is deserted. One after another I push open the doors to empty rooms smelling of dust and mildew. Only a dirty grey towel hanging on a wire and an old worn shoe show that the place has been lived in, but probably some years ago. When the reserve was established the supply and marketing cooperative, local produce purchasing depot, grain and oil depot, veterinary clinic as well as the village administrative office and the personnel were all relocated in the narrow hundred metres of street built by the reserve administration where there is not a trace of Song Guotai's hundred or so men and their hundred or so rifles once housed in this compound. In those times they would lie on rush mats smoking opium and fondling their women. These women, who had been abducted, had to cook for them in the daytime and sleep in turn with them at night. At times, either because the loot wasn't shared equally or because of a woman, fights would break out and wild rioting probably took place on the floors of this very building.

"Only the bandit chief Song Guotai could keep them under control. This fellow was ruthless and cruel, and renowned for his cunning." The warden of the reserve does political work and he is eloquent and convincing. He says his lectures to university students here for practical work range from protection of the giant panda to patriotism and that his lectures can reduce the women students to tears.

He says that amongst the women the bandits abducted there was even a soldier of the Red Army. In 1936, during the Long March, when a regiment of the Red Army was passing through the Mao'ergai grasslands, one of the battalions was attacked by bandits. The ten or so girls of the laundry detachment were abducted and raped. The youngest was seventeen or eighteen and was the only one to survive. She was passed around several of the bandits and eventually an old Qiang man purchased her to be his wife. She lives in a nearby mountain land and can still recite the name of her battalion,

regiment and company, as well as the name of her commanding officer who is now an important official. He's quite excited and says of course he can't talk about all these things to the students, then goes back to talking about the bandit chief Song Guotai.

This Song Guotai started out as a junior assistant, he says, for an opium merchant. When the merchant was killed by Big Brother Chen, the bandit chief who had taken over the district, he threw in his lot with the new boss. By wheeling and dealing he soon became Big Brother's confidante and had access to the small courtyard where Big Brother lived at the back of the compound. The small courtyard was later blown up by the Liberation Army in a mortar attack and is now a mass of trees and shrubs. But in those years it was really a Little Chongqing, a replica of the wartime capital, where Big Brother Chen and his harem debauched themselves on sex and liquor. The only man allowed to wait on him was Song Guotai. A caravan arrived from Ma'erkang full of bandits who had been eying this strip of territory where all you had to do was to sit there waiting for the loot to come to you. A fierce battle raged for two days with deaths and injuries to both sides, but before any clear victory or defeat, they held peace negotiations and sealed an agreement in blood. The gates were opened and the other party invited inside. Upstairs and downstairs two lots of bandits joined in finger-guessing games and drinking liquor. Actually it was Big Brother's plan to get the other side drunk so that he could deal with them swiftly. He got his mistresses to flit about from table to table with their breasts exposed. It wasn't just the other bandits, who of either side could resist? Everyone was rotten drunk. Only the two bandit chiefs were still sitting upright at the table. As pre-arranged, Big Brother snapped his fingers loudly and Song Guotai came to pour more liquor. In one swift action, faster than it takes to tell this, he snatched the rival bandit chief's machine gun from the table and one bullet each sent the pair sprawling, Big Brother included. Then he asked: Anyone who doesn't want to surrender? The bandits looked at one another, not one dared to utter so much as half a murmur of dissent. Song Guotai thereupon moved into Big Brother's little courtyard and all the mistresses came into his possession.

He tells all this with great drama, he isn't boasting when he says he has the women students in tears. He goes on to say that in 1950 they came into the mountains to exterminate the bandits. The little courtyard was surrounded by two companies of soldiers. At daybreak they shouted to the bandits to put down their weapons, change their wicked ways and reform, and warned that there was a blockade of several machine guns at the main gate so no-one should try to escape. It's as if he'd taken part in the battle himself.

"What happened then?" I ask.

"At first they stubbornly resisted so the little courtyard was bombarded with mortar. The surviving bandits threw down their guns and came out to surrender. Song Guotai was not amongst them. When a search was made of the little courtyard they only found a few weeping women huddled together. Everyone said the house had a secret tunnel which went up into the mountain but it was never found, and he has never shown up anywhere. It's over forty years now, some say he's still alive and others say he's dead but there's no real evidence, only theories." He sits back into the round cane chair and tapping his fingers on the edge where his hands are resting, he begins to analyse these theories.

"There are three theories about what happened to him. One is that after escaping he fled to another area, changed his name, and settled somewhere to work in the fields as a peasant. The second is that he could have been killed in the gun fight but the bandits wouldn't admit to it. Bandits have their own set of rules — they may be embroiled in a terrible fight amongst themselves but they won't divulge anything to an outsider. They have their own ethics, a code of bandit chivalry if you like, and yet on the other hand they are cruel and wicked. Bandits have two sides to them. The women had all been abducted but once they came into his lair, they became a part of the gang. They were abused by him and yet kept secrets for him." He is shaking his head not because he finds it incomprehensible but because he is moved by the complexity of the human world, it seems.

"Of course one can't dismiss the third possibility that he fled onto the mountain, couldn't get out, and starved to death."

“Do people get lost on the mountain and die there?” I ask.

“Of course, and not just the peasants from elsewhere who come to dig for medicinal herbs. There are even local hunters who have died on this mountain.”

“Oh?” This is even more intriguing.

“Just last year a hunter went up the mountain and didn’t come back for ten or so days. It was only then that his relatives sought out the village authorities, and we were notified. We contacted the forestry police and had them send us tracker dogs. We got them to sniff his clothes and carried out the search by following them. Afterwards we found him caught in a crack in the rocks. He had died there.”

“How did he come to be stuck in the crack in the rocks?”

“Could’ve been anything, he probably panicked. He was hunting and hunting’s prohibited in the reserve. There’s also the case of a man killing his younger brother.”

“How did this happen?”

“He mistook his brother for a bear. The brothers had gone into the mountain to lay traps. There’s good money in musk. Laying traps has been modernized — a trap can be made with a small piece of wire pulled out of a steel construction cable and a person can lay several hundred in a day on the mountain. It’s impossible for us to supervise an area of this size. They’re all so greedy, it’s hopeless. The brothers went into the mountain to lay traps and in the process were separated. It would be superstitious to believe what the mountain folk say: according to them the brothers fell foul of blackmagic. The two of them bumped into each other after going in a circle around the top of the mountain. There was a heavy mist. The elder brother saw his younger brother, mistook him for a bear, and shot him with his rifle. The elder brother had killed the younger brother. He went home during the night and lay his and his brother’s rifles alongside one another by the bamboo gate of the pig pen so that his mother would see them when she got up to feed the pigs first thing in the morning. He didn’t go inside the house but went back up the mountain to where his brother lay dead and slit his own throat.”

I leave the empty upstairs and stand for a while in the courtyard big enough for a whole caravan of horses, then head back to the highway. There still is no sign of people or vehicles. I look at the dark green mountain enveloped in a haze of rain and mist on the opposite side. A steep greyish-white logging chute is over there and the vegetation has been totally ravaged. Earlier on, before the highway was put through, both sides of the mountain would have been covered in thickly-wooded forest. I am becoming obsessed with getting to the primeval forest at the back of the mountain and find myself drawn to it by some inexplicable force.

The light drizzle gets heavier and turns into a thin film which completely enshrouds the ridge, obscuring the mountain and gully even more. There is the rumble of thunder behind the mountain, muffled and indistinct. Suddenly, I realize that the noise of the river below the highway is much louder, there is a perpetual roar as it charges endlessly at great speed from the snowclad mountains to pour into the Min River. It possesses an intimidating and violent energy not found in rivers flowing over flat country.

5

It is by the pavilion that you encounter her. It is an undefinable longing, a vague hope, it is a chance meeting, a wonderful meeting. You come again at dusk to the riverside, the pounding of clothes being washed reverberates from the bottom of the pitted stone steps. She is standing near the pavilion and like you she is looking at the mountain on the other side. You can't take your eyes off her. She stands out in this small mountain village. Her figure, poise and enigmatic expression can't be found among the local people. You walk away but she lingers in your mind and when you return to the pavilion she is no longer there. It is already dark and in the pavilion a couple of cigarettes glow from time to time as they are smoked, people are there quietly talking and laughing. You can't see their faces, but from their voices you guess that there are probably two men and two women. They don't seem to be locals, who always talk loudly whether they're flirting or being aggressive. You go up and eavesdrop. It seems they are talking about what they have had to do to get away on this excursion: deceive their parents, he to the head of the work unit, and think up all sorts of stories. Talking about it is such fun they can't stop cackling with laughter. You've already passed that age and don't have to be supervised by anyone, still you aren't having as much fun as they are. They probably arrived in the afternoon, but as you recall there's only the one morning bus from the county town. Anyway they probably have their own ways and means. She doesn't seem to be among them and didn't seem to be as cheerful as this crowd. You leave the pavilion and walk straight down along the river-bank. You no longer need to think about finding your way. There are several dozen houses by the river but only the last one, which sells cigarettes, liquor and toilet paper, has the half door-flap of the shop open. The cobblestone road swerves back towards the town and then there's a high wall. In the weak yellow streetlight on the right, through the dark doorway, is the village administrative office. The tall buildings and large courtyard with a watchtower must once have been the residence of a rich and powerful family at one time. Further on is a vegetable plot fenced off with broken bricks and opposite is a hospital. Two lanes up is a cinema, built just a few years back, and now showing a martial arts movie. You've been around this small town more than once so you don't need to go to see what time the evening session starts. The lane at the side of the hospital cuts through to the main street and comes out right opposite the big department store. You know all this perfectly, as if you're an old resident of the town. You could even act as a guide if anyone wanted one, and you desperately need to talk with someone.

You didn't think that after dark there'd be so many people about on this small street. Only the department store has the iron door shut and the grill up and padlocked in front of the windows. Most of the shops are still open but the stalls that were out during the day have been put away and replaced by small tables and chairs or bamboo bed planks. People are out on the street eating and chatting, inside the shops watching television as they eat and chat, and silhouetted on the curtains of upstairs windows moving about. Someone is playing a flute and there are small children crying and yelling — every household is making its own nill-blast din. Songs popular a few years ago in the cities are playing on tape recorders — tenderness laced with petulant lyrics alongside the beat of heavy metal electronic music. People sit in their doorways chatting with people across the street and it is at this time that married women in singlet and shorts and plastic slippers take tubs of dirty bath water to pour into the street. Gangs of adolescent boys are everywhere, deliberately brushing against the young girls strolling hand in hand. Suddenly, you see her again, in front of a fruit stall. You walk more quickly, she's buying pomelos, which are just coming into season. You push in front and ask how much they cost. She touches the round unripe pomelo and walks off. You say, that's right, they're not ripe. You catch up to her. Like to join me? You seem to hear her agree, she even gives a nod which makes her hair shake. You had been nervous, terrified of a rebuff, you hadn't imagine she'd agree so spontaneously. You instantly relax and you keep pace with her.

Are you also here because of Lingshan? You should have been able to say something smarter than that. Her hair shakes again, then you begin to chat.

On your own?

She doesn't answer. The front of the hairdresser's shop is fitted with neon lights and you see her face. It's youthful and that slight weariness is distinctly attractive. You look at the women with their heads under the dryers and getting their hair done and say that modernization has been most rapid in this. She looks away, laughs, and you laugh with her. Her hair covers her shoulders and is black and shiny. You want to say, you have lovely hair, but think it would be going a bit too far, so you don't say it. You walk along with her, and don't say anything else. It's not that you don't want to get on closer terms with her but that you can't think of the right words to say. You can't help feeling embarrassed and want to get out of this dilemma as quickly as possible.

May I walk with you? Again, this is really a stupid thing to say.

You're really a funny person, you seem to hear her mumbling. She looks reproachful and yet approving. However you can tell she's trying to look cheerful, you must keep up with her quick steps. She's not a child and you're no teenager, you try flirting with her.

I can be your guide, you say, this was built in the Ming Dynasty and goes back at least five hundred years, you're talking about the heat-retaining wall behind the Chinese herbalist's shop, one of the flying eaves of the gable curls upwards out of the darkness into the star-lit sky. There's no moon tonight. In the Ming Dynasty, five hundred years ago, no, even just a few decades ago, to walk along this road at night you had to carry a lantern. If you don't believe me you only have to go off this main street and you'll be in pitch-black lanes. You don't even have to go back a few decades, just take twenty or thirty paces and you'll be back in those ancient times.

While chatting you come to the front of the First Class Fragrance Teahouse where there are adults and children standing along the wall. You stand on tiptoes to look inside and stay there as well. The narrow door leads into the long teahouse where all the square tables have been put away. On the rows of benches are the backs of craning heads and right in the middle is a square table draped with a yellow-bordered red cloth: a storyteller in a robe with wide sleeves is seated on a high stool behind it.

"The sun goes down, thick clouds hide the moon, and as usual the Snake Lord and his wife lead their pack of demons back to the Palace of Blue Vastness. On seeing the plump fair-skinned boys and girls and the lavish banquet of pork, beef and lamb, they are delighted. The Snake Lord says to his wife: This good fortune is due to you. Today's birthday celebration is magnificent. One of the demons says: Today being her Ladyship's birthday requires wind and string music and the Master of the Grotto has had to busy himself with these." Bang! He slams his wooden clapper on the table, "Indeed, lofty aspirations produce ideas!"

He puts aside the clapper and taking the drum stick strikes a few dull beats on the slack drum skin. In his other hand he takes up a tambourine threaded with metal bits which he slowly shakes so that it tinkles. Then in his old rasping voice he begins to explain:

"The Snake Lord gives instructions and in all four quarters are activities which immediately transform the Palace of Blue Vastness with colourful decorations and a medley of wind and string instruments." He suddenly raises his voice, "And, when the frog heard, it croaked loudly and the owl waved his conductor's baton." He deliberately imitates the recitation style used by TV performers and makes the audience roar with laughter.

You look at her and both of you laugh. This is the happy face you've been hoping for.

Shall we go in and sit down? You've found something to say. You lead her past wooden benches and peoples' legs, find a bench which isn't full and squeeze in. Just look at the storyteller trying to get the audience worked up. He's standing up and banging his clapper again, very loudly.

"The birthday salutations now begin! All the lesser demons —" he gaily hums as he turns to the left performing the actions of bowing with hands cupped together in salutation, then turns to the right to wave his hands and sing in the voice of the old seductress, "Thank you, thank you."

They've been telling this story for a thousand years, you say close to her ear.

And they'll still go on telling it. She seems to be your echo.

Will they go on telling it for another thousand years? you ask.

Mmm, she replies, pursing her lips like a cheeky child. You feel very happy.

“Let's go back to Chen Fatong. He makes it to the foot of Donggong Mountain in three days, a journey normally taking seven times seven equals forty-nine days, where he encounters the Daoist Wang. Fatong bows in salutation and says: I have a request of the Venerable Master. The Daoist Wang responds with a salutation and Fatong asks: May I ask where the Palace of Blue Vastness can be found? Why do you ask? The demons there are really fierce. Who would dare go there? My surname is Chen and my name, Fatong, means 'comprehending Buddha's laws'. I have come especially to capture the demons. The Daoist Master heaves a sigh and says, young boys and girls have just been sent there today, they may already be in the Snake Lord's belly. On hearing this, Fatong exclaims, I must go quickly to their rescue!”

Bang! You see the storyteller raising his drum stick in his right hand and rattling the tambourine in his left hand. His eyes open wide until they show the whites and as he recites a chant his whole body begins to shake ... You smell something, a subtle fragrance in the midst of the strong smell of tobacco and sweat, it's coming from her hair and from her. There is the cracking of melon seeds as people eat the seeds with their eyes fixed on the storyteller, who has donned a monk's robe. He is holding a magic sword in his right hand and a dragon's horn in his left and talking faster and faster, as if he is spitting out a string of pearls.

“Laying down three times the magic tablet, one-two-three, three troop-summoning amulets instantly muster the divine troops and the generals of Lu Mountain, Mao Mountain and Longhu Mountain, *o-ya-ya a-ha-ha da-gu-long-dong cang-ng-ya-ya-ya-wu-hu*. Emperor of Heaven, Emperor of Earth, I am the younger brother sent by the True Lord Emperor to exterminate demons. Holding the precious magical sword and treading on the wheel of wind and fire I wheel to the right and wheel to the left —”

She turns and stands up, you follow after her, stepping over people's legs. They all glare at you.

“Quick, quick, you've got your orders!”

A roar of laughter follows the two of you.

What's the matter?

Nothing.

Why didn't you want to stay?

I was feeling sick.

You're sick?

No, I feel better now, it's stuffy inside.

You walk outside and the people sitting on the street chatting look up at the two of you.

Should we look for somewhere quiet?

Yes.

You lead her around a corner into a small lane, the sound of people and the lights of the street fall behind you. There are no streetlights in the lane, just the weak glow coming from the windows of the houses. She slows down and you think back to what has just happened.

Don't you think you and I are like the demons being pursued?

She chuckles.

Then you and she can't stop laughing. She laughs so much that she doubles over. Her heels clatter noisily on the cobblestones. You emerge from the lane and before you are paddy fields bathed in faint glimmering light. In the hazy distance are a few buildings, you know it's the one middle school in town. A little further off are sprawling hills beneath the grey star-lit night sky. A breeze starts up, bringing ripples of cool air which sink into the clean fragrance of the paddy rice. You draw close to

her shoulder, and she doesn't move away. Neither of you say anything but go wherever your feet take you along the greyish paths between the fields.

Enjoying yourself?

Yes.

Don't you think it's wonderful?

I don't know, I can't say, don't ask me.

You lean against her arm and she leans towards you, you look down to her, you can't see her features but you sense her small nose and you again smell that familiar warmth. Suddenly she comes to a halt.

Let's go back, she mutters.

Back where?

I have to get some rest.

I'll take you back.

I don't want anyone with me.

She is quite adamant.

Do you have relatives or friends here? Or are you here on your own?

She doesn't answer. You don't know where she's from nor where she's going back to. Still, you escort her to the main street and she walks off on her own, vanishing at the end of the street, as if in a story, as if in a dream.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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